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SUBJECT: MANY SOUTHERNERS ARE UNHAPPY ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENSUS

1. (SBU) Summary: With barely three months until the scheduled national census, several southern Nigerian groups have threatened to boycott the exercise to protest the exclusion of information on religious affiliation and ethnicity from the census process. Many Southerners (mostly Christian) want these categories to be included in the data collection because they believe that Northerners (predominantly Moslem) have arrogated more than their fair share of political power and government patronage based on inflated population numbers to the detriment of the South. GON continues to stand firm on excluding these data from the process. However there now appears to be some GON waffling on the scheduling of the census. A Southern boycott of the census would erode the credibility of the exercise. End Summary.

2. (U) On November 29 and 30, the GON Population Commission (NPC) is scheduled to conduct a long-awaited census to determine Nigeria's population. The Commission said it was determined to conduct a census truly reflective of Nigerian population distribution. Commission Chairman Samu,ila Makama announced new guidelines that he said would effectively address the criticism generated by the last census. Specifically, he announced that information on ethnicity and religion, the inclusion of which was a source of friction during the previous census, would not be collected in the 2005 process. He said such data constitutes a threat to peace and unity, as rival religious and ethnic groups compete for numerical superiority. &It is safer to ignore religion and ethnicity since there would be the temptation by each group to explore ways to have an edge over the other,8 Makama explained.

3. (SBU) Rather than assuage feelings, the new approach has aggravated some Southern religious and ethnic groups. Several southern groups rejected the new guidelines and vowed not to participate in the exercise, arguing that a national census that omits data on ethnicity and religious affiliation will be meaningless. A true census, they insist, must reflect the multi-cultural nature of a country.

4. (SBU) Ohaneze Ndigbo, the most influential of the pan-Igbo social-political groups, has threatened to lead Igbos out of the exercise unless the census forms include state of origin, language group, religious affiliation, ethnic group, gender, and age. Igbos consider themselves as Nigeria's primary entrepreneurs and traders. In many areas Igbos claim to be the second or third largest ethnic group, although not indigenous to their communities. Thus, Igbos feel a census that ignores ethnicity will significantly undercount them since so many Igbos live outside their traditional southeastern homeland. They see this as an attempt to continue to short change them; political offices and government revenues are parceled out to regions and states, in large measure, based on their population. Afenifere, a similar group representing the Yoruba viewpoint, also warned that its members might boycott the census if demographic data are not included. Yinka Odumakin, Afenifere,s General Secretary, told PolSpec the huge financial resources

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committed to the census would amount to a waste if vital issues like ethnicity and religion are not included.

5. (U) Religious groups have also been speaking out. In April, the Methodist Church of Nigeria issued a statement opposing the exclusion of religion and ethnicity from the census process. Likewise, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) threatened to boycott the census if religion and ethnicity were excluded. CAN General Secretary Saidu Dogo told journalists in Lagos that both variables were vital to development and unity in any country, including Nigeria.

6. (SBU) The new approach has also generated controversy in government circles. On January 15, governors from the Southeastern zone issued a resolution criticizing the exclusion of the two variables. The governors vowed to mobilize against the exercise if the issues of ethnicity and religion were not addressed. They argued that since many major national issues are adjudicated on the basis of

ethnicity and religion, the census must include these factors. However, on August 13 these same Southeast governors did a volte-face, expressing their "total support" for the head count and advising citizens of the Southeast to participate in the exercise. (Comment: Pressure from the ruling PDP, to which all five governors belong, probably caused the gubernatorial change of heart. End comment.)

17. (SBU) COMMENT: A population census in any representative democracy is always electrified. In Nigeria it has a few added and highly charged dimensions. Historically, Northern Nigeria has dominated national politics. Part of the rationale justifying this arrangement was that the North had more people. An ancillary maxim was that Muslims outnumbered Christians. Many Southerners and Christians dispute these claims. They want to use the census to prove themselves right. In the Nigerian political culture, whichever group or region can claim numerical majority also has superior claim on political leadership. In a nutshell, that is what this census is about. That is why Nigeria has never had a crisis-free census. Previous exercises have always been followed with criticisms by groups that felt &cheated.⁸ This exercise, currently scheduled for November, is not likely to be different. But this time the Southerners believe they have the numbers to tip the balance in their favor. End comment.

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